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SUBJECT: Casamance: Increased Violence and a Potential New Leader

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Between November 2-4, PolCouns visited the Casamance to assess the region's volatile security situation where road hijackings by armed gunmen have become commonplace. Additionally, a border quarrel between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau near Cabrousse has created tensions that have led to a significant increase in the presence of both militaries which resulted in a standoff, but so far has not developed into an active conflict. End Summary.

Rebels at the Door of Ziguinchor

¶2. (SBU) In the past, fighters from the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) had avoided static positions near towns and villages for fear of being shelled. But in a bold recent move they attacked the village of Baraf, two miles from the regional capital Ziguinchor, and now occupy the school of Baraf. The Prefect of Ziguinchor told Embassy that they had relocated 200 elementary school students from Baraf to the city of Ziguinchor and wondered why the state was not doing anything to dislodge the rebels. The Governor of Ziguinchor promised the people of Baraf that the state would protect them, but those who tried to return to Baraf were threatened by rebels and had to leave their homes again. The Governor has since been changed and replaced by Cheikh Tidiane Dieng, the former Governor of Tambacounda, who is reputed to be close to the ruling party. The rebels are apparently occupying Baraf because it sits at a crucial crossroads for produce coming from the south on its way to Ziguinchor and then north.

The Prodigal Son

¶3. (SBU) President Abdoulaye Wade recently appointed the Mayor of Ziguinchor, Abdoulaye Balde, to be the new Minister of Defense. This puts Balde at the heart of the Casamance crisis during a period characterized by the lack of a serious peace initiatives and the paralysis of the political wing of the MFDC. It is not clear if Balde will be willing to invest his political capital in this complex crisis - a feeling that was echoed by the chair of the Regional Council of Ziguinchor. A close aide to Balde confided to PolCouns that he is not in a position to cross partisan lines to bring together all the actors who can help piece together the peace puzzle in the Casamance. He noted that Balde is a prisoner of his supporters, who see Casamance politics as a zero sum game.

Unified command

¶4. (SBU) In the absence of a credible political branch, the military wing of the MFDC now leads the way and this partly accounts for the fierce leadership battle that has erupted among various factions. Several sources close to the MFDC told PolCouns that the MFDC is now closer than ever to having a unified command. The man who may take charge is Mamadou Niantang Diatta, from Kartiak in northern Casamance. He allegedly occupies the base that used to be the stronghold of Salif Sadio known as Etat Major near Guinea-Bissau.

Salif allegedly agreed to give up his command for a unified one under Niantang Diatta. Diatta wishes to have a non-bloody transition and his approach is to have Cesar Atoute Badiate and other prominent rebels form a consultative body around him in the new command.

Cabrousse Border Dispute

15. (SBU) A new element that may influence the Casamance conflict is the border dispute between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. The dispute started when Victor Mandiga, a former Minister of Finance of Guinea-Bissau, allegedly tried to build a hotel on a piece of land belonging to Guinea-Bissau stretching from the village of Boudiediete to Cap Roxo (near Cap Skiring in Senegal). Mandiga built his own PVC border markers painted in red and white and planted them to make the border visible. The border in that area is demarcated by three almost invisible concrete stones, known as markers 182, 183, and 184, left by the Portuguese. This land is traditionally cultivated by local Senegalese villagers who believe it is part of Senegal and had even authorized a small hotel to be built there. As the border area is not directly accessible from Guinea-Bissau one has to either go through the border post of Mpack (in Senegal) or cross a river by pirogue. The people of Cabrousse not only uprooted and threw away Mandiga's border markers but they also destroyed the coconut tress he had planted on this piece of land allegedly allocated to him by the Government of Guinea-Bissau.

Guinea-Bissau soldiers march into Senegal

16. (SBU) During the week of October 19, a company of Bissau Guinean

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soldiers crossed the river and occupied the small hotel owned by a Senegalese named Aziz. They planted two brand new flags supported by tree branches. The Deputy Prefect of Cabrousse told PolCouns that Bissau Guineans entered about one kilometer into Senegalese territory to the lighthouse on Cape Roxo to look for border marker 184, which they alleged the Senegalese had destroyed on purpose.

17. (SBU) A veteran NCO who mans the Senegalese military post of Boudiediete told PolCouns that he walked with the Bissau Guinean soldiers and made sure they did not go into the village of Cabrousse as he felt that some of them were clearly on a punitive mission and wanted the villagers to pay for the vandalism against Mandiga's project. The NCO regretted that the Senegalese authorities did not act in time to resolve this dispute, which has actually been brewing since 2008. He further commented that intelligence provided to him by his informers indicated that Guinea-Bissau had assembled about three thousand troops with heavy equipment along the border (near Suzana and Valera). On November 4, PolCouns crossed into Guinea-Bissau, where the Deputy Prefect of Sao Domingo confirmed the presence of troops (scaled down) in the Valera area. The same day, Zamora Induta, the Chief of Staff of Guinea-Bissau's armed forces came to inspect the troops. (Comment: For Induta, this border crisis was a perfect opportunity to stamp some measure of authority over the country's fractious military by using the issue of sovereignty as a rallying point. End comment.)

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The security situation in the Casamance has deteriorated as evidence by a noticeable increase in military personnel. So far, the GOS has managed to restrain its armed forces, but if the border dispute with Guinea-Bissau is not proQly resolved, it could provide the MFDC with new allies in the Bissau Guinean army and shatter the fragile and relative peace in the Casamance. The situation has degraded sufficiently that several members of the donors group (i.e. Austria, Belgium, Canada, the European Commission, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UNDP, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have agreed to send a letter to the Prime Minister expressing concern about the rise in violence and the potential impact on development and humanitarian projects in the region. End Comment.
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